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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 CHENGDU 000031

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR EAP/CM

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2/17/2019

TAGS: PGOV ECON SOCI CH

SUBJECT: SOUTHWEST CHINA: VISITING GUIZHOU'S MIAO MINORITY

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CLASSIFIED BY: James A. Boughner, Consul General, U.S. Consulate General, Chengdu.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

**¶1. (C) Summary:** A recent trip with an ethnic Miao anthropologist to his home in the Miao/Hmong heartland of Guizhou, China's poorest province, provided an interesting window on rapid changes currently underway in rural areas of the region. Large government and private investments in tourist development in Guizhou's largest Miao village illustrated some of the inherent conflicts between tourism development and cultural preservation. One local official described how the suppression of Falungong remains a public security priority and the focus of his work. Government-permitted return to traditional forestry management practices in the 1990s may have facilitated relations between the Miao and Han as well as improved local environmental protection efforts. End Summary.

The Miao Minority

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**¶2. (U)** China's Miao minority, known outside of China as Hmong or Mong, are located principally in Guizhou, Yunnan (bordering on Laos), and Sichuan Provinces. The great majority of the world's Miao/Hmong (nine out of 12 million) live in China, four million of them in Guizhou, one of the country's poorest provinces. While today's image of the Miao among China's majority Han appears to be relatively friendly compared with some other less favorably viewed groups (Uighurs, Tibetans, and Hui), during the 18th and 19th centuries the Miao had a fierce reputation, rebelling against the Qing Dynasty every twenty to thirty years. Later in the late 1930s, the Miao also rebelled against high taxes and the drafting of Miao young men into Chiang Kai-Shek's army. Guizhou's newly-built Miao Museum makes no mention of the frequent fighting between Miao and Han during the 18th and 19th centuries.

Minorities as "Others"

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**¶3. (SBU)** Congenoff traveled to Guizhou in early January with well-known Southwest Minorities University anthropologist Yang Zhenwen who shared his thoughts on some of the current challenges facing the Miao. Although the Miao retain their spoken language and culture, including a large oral tradition of customary law preserved in song and popular memory that is still practiced in their villages in parallel with Chinese law, maintaining their traditions has been difficult as Han and urban culture penetrates the countryside through road, cell phone and now ubiquitous satellite TV dishes. Many Miao villages have few people between the ages of 15 to 30 who have not left to work in the cities of Guizhou or to China's industrialized east coast.

¶ 14. (SBU) According to Professor Yang, himself a Miao, minority cultures suffer in China when their representation as "others" by the majority Han is played up and altered to fit the needs of the tourist industry and economic development. For example, the radical shortening, altering and rescheduling of ethnic celebrations in disregard of traditional taboos and practices is often decreed by local authorities for the sake of mass tourism, making the transmission of traditional culture to the next generation difficult. Mass tourism makes it harder to maintain traditions as the timing and content of ethnic holidays are sometimes changed drastically to suit the needs and expectations of Han tourists.

Case in Point: Xijiang Village

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¶ 15. (C) Congenoff accompanied Yang to Xijiang Village in Leishan County, the heartland of the Miao in Guizhou. This 1700 year-old village of 1280 households is the largest Miao village in Guizhou and perhaps the world. Over the past two years, a tourism development company and the local government invested millions of dollars on a project that resulted in the removal of farmers whose fields surrounded the village. The farmland was replaced with a large civic plaza, miscellaneous large buildings, shops, and a landscaped riverbed. As described by Yang, the result was a "Miao city," not a Miao village and the Miao traditionally do not have cities. Xijiang became an inaccurate representation of traditional Miao life while its farmers lost their land. Han developers profited, but the Miao themselves gained little. Yang said that before the project got underway, he and some other ethnic Miao scholars opposed it to no effect. Yang pointed out several large warehouse-looking buildings built over the past year in the "Miao style" that he indicated were empty.

Wuxiu Village

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¶ 16. (SBU) Congenoff also accompanied Yang to his sister's home village of Wuxiu. The village has about 800 residents and is located 15 kilometers from the county seat of Leishan in the Qiandong Miao and Dong Minority Autonomous Prefecture. Many homes in the village had satellite dishes, 1.2-meter diameter dishes called "pot covers" (huogai), that provide dozens of channels of PRC television programming. While the Guizhou provincial government is promoting village cable TV systems that supply 10 channels, most families appeared able to afford (about USD 100) their own individual dishes and receivers that provide dozens of channels.

¶ 17. (C) Yang introduced Congenoff to his brother-in-law, Yang Tongkui, who has been village party secretary and overall leader in Wuxiu for the past twenty years. Secretary Yang, who was educated as an accountant, handles loans, utility bills and medical insurance on behalf of the villagers. The party secretary told Congenoff he was very busy distributing medical insurance cards to the village's 180 households. Villagers pay 10 RMB (USD 1.50) per month for medical insurance, an amount matched by the central government. Should someone need medical care, 80 percent of the cost is covered by the government. Since his office was taken over for use by a construction crew building a new road that will link Wuxiu to the county seat, the party secretary has worked out of his house.

Chasing the Falungong

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¶ 18. (C) One villager, a man in his late 20s, told Congenoff about his work with the government of a nearby township (xiangzhen) and as an assistant to the county party secretary. The young official said most of his duties revolved around suppression of the Falungong, and in particular tracking down low denomination Chinese currency notes that had been defaced with messages from the Falungong. The messages denounce the Communist Party and

call on people to resign from the Party in order to "avoid disaster." The official said he reports the bills and where they are found to the Leishan County Public Security Bureau. Congenoff asked if the official had been receiving, as Congenoff has in Chengdu, automated phone calls from the Falungong calling on him to resign from the Party. The official replied he had not heard of such calls in his area but that the Falungong sometimes makes anonymous calls to local county government offices. (Note: Congenoff has seen 1 RMB bills with Falungong messages twice during the past year in Chengdu).

Party Committee Notices

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¶9. (SBU) Posted in or near the village party secretary's home included such notices as:

-- A contract between Leishan County and the village forest protection officer that specified goals for 90 percent of areas designated as forestland to be planted with trees rather than cultivated for crops within three years.

-- A Leishan County People's Government Office Document, "Notice on Compensation for Land Taking, Tearing Down Buildings and Moving for the Construction of a Secondary Road from Kairi to Datang in Leigong County."

-- A responsibility document dated July 1, 2006 that pledges the village party committee to ensure villagers do not store explosives or firearms and that the committee educates them about the state regulations.

-- A two-page document dated September 5, 2008 from The Leishan County State Land Resources Bureau, "Notice on the Policy Compensation for Land and Resettlement," which listed compensation to be paid, in connection with the construction of secondary roads and for various kinds of structures, including 1000 RMB (USD 140) for a concrete lined water pool, and 600 RMB (USD 90) for a pool made from compacted earth. On the second page of the document someone had written, "Is this for real?" (shifou zhenshi).

-- A handwritten document dated November 12, 2008 announcing that the subsidies for peasants who had converted part of their land from crops to forest had arrived and called on people who had not picked up their payments (listing 46 names) to come and get them before November 14.

Fire Prevention Feast Binds Villagers Under Traditional Law

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¶10. (U) Congenoff's visit to Wuxiu village coincided with a traditional feast during which villagers pledge themselves to

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prevent fires. All the fires in the 180 households of the village were extinguished ceremonially. Congenoff saw an older Miao man dressed in a traditional costume visit Secretary Yang's home, chanting as he poured water on the household fire. Later, each hearth was relit by a fire brought to households from a common village ceremonial fire. A cow was ritually slaughtered and its meat cooked and shared with all the villagers who gather to feast and drink together. A guard was set up at the entrance of the village for the duration of the feast to keep outsiders out. If during the year someone is careless and causes the fire, they must buy the cow for the following year's feast.

Comments

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¶11. (U) As noted in recent research published by Miao scholars in the PRC, Miao customary law sets aside village forestland as a community resource that is protected and managed. With the founding of the PRC in 1949, Miao-managed forestlands were mistakenly considered to be virgin forest and so became state

property. The removal of the forestlands from the management under Miao customary law and their effective opening to anyone's use as "state or local collectivity assets" led to conflicts during the 1980s. For example, from 1981 - 1987 in the Miao county of Jinping alone, there were over three thousand land disputes that led to nine riots, three deaths and 86 people seriously injured.

¶12. (U) During the 1990s, many Miao villages in the Qiandong Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture re-established Miao customary law relating to forest management that had previously been in effect for hundreds of years. In two recent books on the operation of Miao customary law in Miao villages today, Guizhou legal scholars report that nearly all village disputes are resolved under village agreements (minyue) based on Miao traditional law. Only very few cases from the Miao community are brought to the PRC courts, even in instances where the fine under Miao law is much higher than under PRC law. The legal scholars comment that the scrupulous observance of traditional law by Miao communities is remarkable given the great difficulty the PRC has in establishing rule by law in the countryside.

¶13. (SBU) This return to traditional forestry management practices appears to have both facilitated relations between the Miao and Han and improved local environmental protection efforts. During three days traveling in rural Qiandong Prefecture, Congenoff saw many secondary roads under construction. Large government investments in roads and other infrastructure improvements, while a source of local economic development, also bring with it the strong influences of the majority Han culture much closer to the Miao than ever before.  
BOUGHNER